Civil Rights History Project

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Interviewee: Mr. David M. Ackerman and Mrs. Satoko I. Ackerman

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Location: Room LJ110, Jefferson Building, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.

Videographer: John Bishop

Length: 1:01:44 minutes

Special notes: Ms. Elaine Nichols of the National Museum of African American History and Culture and Mr. Guha Shankar of the Library of Congress were also present as observers.

John Bishop: We`re on.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Tuesday, September 20, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am with videographer John Bishop in Washington, D.C., at the Library of Congress`s Jefferson Building, um, to do an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and the Library of Congress. And we have project curator Elaine Nichols of the museum with us today as well.

We`re delighted to have as our interviewees today Mr. and Mrs. Ackerman, that is, David Mercer Ackerman and Satoko Ito Ackerman. And, um, you`ve very generously come in, and I know it`s on the eve of a big trip you`re about to take in a couple of days, so thank you so much for fitting us in. We`re very pleased to be with you. It`s really a privilege and an honor. Thank you.

Sakoto Ackerman: You are very welcome.

JM: Mrs. Ackerman, I thought maybe just to start if you could talk a little bit about your personal history, where you were born, where you were raised and educated.

SA: Oh, goodness! Um, I was raised in Japan, Osaka area, and I was, um, um - I went through junior and senior high and first year of college at Kobe College in Nishinomiya, near Kobe, Japan. Um, and as you may know, Kobe College for women was, uh, started by missionaries some years ago, and so it was a mission school, and that`s how I was introduced to English and to Christianity during those years.

And, um, I guess at the end of my freshman year in college there, out of the clear blue, one day one of the missionaries, Angie Crew, called me into the office and said, "Miss Ito, would you like to go over to the States to study?" And I was just totally taken aback, and I said, "Yes, I would, but I will have to go home and ask my father." [Laughs] And that`s how I came to the States, actually to South Dakota, to Yankton, South Dakota, to Yankton College. Um, this turned out to be a project of, uh, um, South Dakota Conference of Congregational Churches. They wanted to have someone from some other county come and share their life with them. And so, that`s how I ended up coming to the United States.

JM: You arrived in South Dakota -?

SA: In 1959, August.

JM: Yeah.

SA: And I went through Yankton College and then to, uh, seminary. Well, actually, after Yankton, I went home. And, uh, Conference called - not called, wrote and said, "There is still more fund in Toko Fund, so if you wanted to come back to do, uh, graduate work, we can do it." And so, I came back to do seminary.

JM: Right. We`ll pick back up in a moment at that point. But, Mr. Ackerman, we invite you to offer the same kind of perspective on your background.

David Ackerman: Okay. Well, it`s probably more ordinary than what my wife has experienced, but I was, uh, born and raised in a small town in, uh, Illinois, Mt. Carroll, a small farming, uh, community, two thousand, uh, people. Um, as I got into my teenage years, I found the community to be very stifling and could not wait to move out. Uh, but looking back on it, it was just a terrific place to grow up. It was, uh, a safe but free environment, you know. I mean, as kids we could - things didn`t have to be organized, you know. We made up things on our own and could go any place and do anything our imaginations came up with, except we couldn`t get into any serious trouble because if we did anything untoward, somebody would call our mother, because everybody knew everybody. [SA laughs] So, it was a great little town.

And, uh, and I went from there to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, not too far away, but far enough, and, uh, majored there in history and political science. Um, and during my senior year, uh, a fairly traumatic event happened. My brother committed suicide, uh, because he was, uh, he was gay, but he had taken part in ROTC when he had been in college and owed a commitment to Uncle Sam. And so was, uh, in Ranger training at Fort Benning, Georgia, when our beloved military discovered that [0:05:00] he was gay, and he was, uh, threatened with, uh, dishonorable discharge at that time. And I think he simply could not accept the, uh, the shame of that.

Well, that just knocked the legs out from under me, and I was just kind of a lost soul, and a friend of mine, who was in seminary, Chicago Theological Seminary, suggested that I go there. Um, so that`s what I did, and, uh, that turned out to be a life-changing experience, as well. It was exactly the right place for me to be at that time.

JM: Yeah. Um, let me ask each of you, um, when you first had your mind turned towards the question of race relations in the United States.

SA: I think it has to be when the idea of going down to Selma was introduced. Up until then, I hadn`t really been aware of any conflict or any differences between people in the United States. I`d kind of embraced the entire culture and I, I just did not know anything about it until I saw the film of Bloody Sunday on TV, and Jesse [Jackson] talked about our need to go down. And none of that was kind of on my radar before.

Oh, I take it back. At Yankton College, uh, there were a few African students, two or three. Yankton College was small, like two hundred, three hundred students, and two or three students were from Africa. And when they, I was told, when they went down to the town to get a haircut, they couldn`t get a haircut. And at that time, we were all outraged. And I did not understand the meaning of this at all, but I recall at the time thinking, you know, partly that was because they were, um, foreign students, maybe. But then, also, I was aware that they were black and that there was some discrimination, but that kind of went sort of one part of my brain and went out until Selma came.

JM: Had you yourself experienced any, um, difficult situations as a visiting Japanese student?

SA: As a matter of fact, no, not - absolutely no. And that in itself was, looking back, kind of a surprise, because, uh, it was back in [19]59, and I was totally, totally accepted. And I just felt that was the way it was supposed to be and never thought anything differently.

JM: Mr. Ackerman, did New Carrolton - Mt. Carroll, excuse me - Mt. Carroll have, um, an African American community at all?

DA: No, it was basically a lily-white, uh, community. It had an air of tolerance and nondiscrimination about it, but it was not often put to the practical test of how that worked out. While I was in high school, there was a black family that finally moved into Mt. Carroll. And, you know, I saw it was welcomed and graciously received, but, you know, it was predominately a white experience, and I did not grow up with a great awareness of, uh, race relations and the history of that, uh, in this country.

JM: Did that tragedy with your brother, was it anything at the time that, um, that you interpreted in any way through a political lens beyond the personal tragedy?

DA: I did not. I did not. I was so deeply immersed in just my own personal grief at that point that I didn`t see the broader dimension. And it really took me quite a while before I did see the political dimension to it.

JM: Um-hmm. So, I gather that the two of you likely met in Chicago.

SA: Yes, we did.

DA: Well, as a matter of fact, yes. Yes, Satoko had come there the semester before I arrived, but, yes, we fairly quickly found each other that, uh, that year and did fall in love and that was - and we were in that relationship when Selma happened.

JM: I`m interested just in your perspective about, uh, years at theological seminary. Was - the question of race relations didn`t present itself in some fashion into the midst of that moral community, moral deliberation?

DA: Well, yeah, in a sense, it did, um, and in part because of the location of the seminary. Chicago Theological Seminary is on the campus of the University of Chicago, uh, in Hyde Park. And, uh, just across [0:10:00] the, uh, the Midway was the, uh, uh, community of Woodlawn, which was a, uh, predominantly black community, and very economically depressed, and, uh, somewhat violent. And there were, um - you know, some of the clinical activities that students took part in did take us into the black parts of Chicago. So, yeah, we began to become somewhat aware, you know.

JM: Yeah. Can you say a word or two more about the kind of things you saw and how that - what your impressions at the time were, if you can recall them?

DA: Well, it was really just seeing the poverty, just the extent of poverty and the difficult living situations that people had. I mean, I had just not been exposed to a big city, uh, before and I was just kind of struck by how different the North Side of Chicago was, uh, from the South Side. For a naÃ¯ve small-town Midwestern boy, it was a revelation.

JM: If you can, take me, the both of you, if you would, please, kind of through those years of the early [19]60s and up towards the spring of [19]65.

DA: Um, well, from the civil rights perspective, it was just a, just a terrific, uh, half-decade and full decade, in fact. I mean, we had been through, uh, Birmingham and the March on Washington and, uh, the Montgomery Bus Boycott back in the [19]50s, not that I was terribly aware or engaged with, uh, with those. Um, Kennedy came into office, and I really resonated with Kennedy and his dynamism and his, uh, call to public service. In a sense, that played a role in my future, uh, career ambitions.

But it really wasn`t until, uh, the Selma event occurred that it began to become a personal, uh, issue, uh, and then it was almost accidental. And, uh, the accidental part of it was that Jesse Jackson was part of my seminary class. Um, he was already deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, already a very accomplished preacher, but he had never gotten any formal seminary training. So, he had come to CTS [Chicago Theological Seminary] to, uh, to do that.

Um, Bloody Sunday occurred on March 7, uh, 1965, uh, just a brutal and fortunately well-covered event. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and others had decided to make Selma a focal point for an effort to get voting rights legislation, uh, enacted. That`s the one piece that had been omitted from the 1964 Civil Rights, uh, Act. And so, the technique was to create, uh, create confrontation, um, but the deal was in a nonviolent manner, and call upon, uh, the moral conscience of, uh, people whose conscience could be reached.

Um, the seminary had a, uh, a weekly convocation on either - and I forget whether it was Sunday night or Monday night. It was just a gathering of the faculty and the students. And, uh, and at that [SA clears throat] week`s convocation, Jesse, in effect, commandeered, uh, the meeting and, uh, in his very powerful style, just made Selma a personal moral issue for us. Uh, Dr. King had issued his call for "all people of good will" to come to Selma, uh, especially people in the ministry or related to the ministry. Uh, and Jesse posed that issue to us: He was going. Who would go with him? Um, [speaking to SA] do you want to add anything to that?

SA: Well, I felt it very personally: "I must go. I really need to go and stand up for - against this violence that was happening." And I didn`t think, you know, a woman, a girl, [laughs] foreign student, what - could I have done anything? And it just didn`t occur to me. After Jesse spoke, it was as though I just had to go. And Dave, as a matter of fact, kind of got upset with me [laughs] for deciding to go, because we were dating, and, uh, he felt that he would go, but if I had been, you know, there, he would have felt like he had to take care of me or something.

And I felt that that was wrong, [laughs] that I needed to go for myself. [Laughter] And so, I went and also a girlfriend, Ginny [Virginia] [0:15:00] uh, now Ramsey Griffith, um - she and I and, I guess, the rest were men from, students from the seminary. But my feeling was that the call was directly to me, something about that that I just couldn`t say no.

JM: Yeah. Let`s pause for just one -

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We`re rolling.

JM: Mrs. Ackerman, let me - you mentioned that the power of this appeal from Jesse Jackson, and you were both saying, at this weekly convocation.

SA: Um-hmm.

DA: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, can you tell me what you recall of Jesse Jackson as a young man in that context and as a classmate?

SA: Well, I felt Jesse was self-important. [Laughs, and DA laughs] I felt - [laughing] I don`t know, I, uh - on the other hand, when he spoke that night, somehow - uh, I didn`t know Jesse really, personally, until then, before then, and I just saw him as kind of a, uh, um, [sighs] very conscious of what he was about. And somehow that night he became more than, than kind of superficial person. It seemed to me he was so sincere and so from his heart. He wanted to do this and he wanted to have some of us, uh, go with him, because it is the right thing to do. So, something about what, that night - what he said and how he said it - uh, made a difference in the way I responded.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Mr. Ackerman, did you have a - how do you recall Jesse Jackson in those years as a classmate?

DA: Oh, very much on the same terms. There was a, um, a quality of vanity about, uh, Jesse that just was very, uh, very evident. But, like Toko, I did not know him, uh, at all well, even though we were in the same class and must have shared the same classes oftentimes during that time, but I just had no recollection of that. But that night in the convocation, Jesse became, became a leader. And, uh, he just spoke with such, uh, such passion and such integrity, um, that it was impossible not to respond to it in some fashion.

JM: Yeah. Would there have been in the course of your, uh, training in seminary, would there have been, either formally or informally, discussions of race and gender that were in play at that time?

DA: Oddly enough, I don`t recall.

SA: I don`t recall either.

DA: There was a, um, a course on kind of the sociology of Chicago where we dealt with, you know, ecological barriers and other things in city life.

SA: Um-hmm.

DA: And so, yeah, there were discussions there, but I don`t recall it elsewhere.

JM: Was your - uh, was that impulse, your first impulse Mrs. Ackerman noted about your concern about her perhaps joining on this trip to Selma, was it the prospect of violence or other issues?

DA: Oh, I think it was the prospect of violence.

SA: Um-hmm.

DA: And I was playing the traditional male role of being the protector, uh, you know, and as Toko has continuously educated me that is not necessarily, uh, [SA laughs] needed or desired. So, [laughs] but yes, I did feel a responsibility for, uh, for taking care of Toko and I thought that would make the whole trip much more difficult.

JM: Yeah. Let me invite you to tell the story of how you moved from that appeal by Jesse Jackson to actually departing from Chicago, how many people, and how you arranged the travel, and those kinds of things.

SA: I simply went along. Somehow Jesse and some of the other guys arranged everything. There were twelve of us, I`m told, in two cars, two I think was station wagons or vans -

DA: Two vans, as I recall.

SA: Vans, something, which belonged to the students that went. And, uh, we went in caravan with Illinois license plates, integrated - Jesse integrated the - the rest of us were - well, I guess I am sort of part of, uh, nonwhite, but I didn`t see myself as, as - differently. And [0:20:00] we drove through the whole trip. We didn`t - people took turns driving. I remember different people driving different cars, and we just kept going.

JM: Yeah, um-hmm.

SA: - the parts of the country that I hadn`t seen.

DA: It was about, uh - what - six hundred and fifty miles, I think, from Chicago to Selma, something like that. Of course, no expressways back then, so it was a fairly, fairly tedious, uh, you know, two-lane road kind of, uh, kind of trip.

Um, but let me just say a word about the moral wrestling that students had to go through, because that was - the decision was, uh, the challenge was placed to the entire community. And twelve of us said yes. A lot of other students wanted to say yes -

SA: Say yes, yes.

DA: But, you know, for a variety of reasons, uh, couldn`t. But one of my most, and I think our most, vivid memories is a very good friend of ours, who was a student there from, uh, Texas.

SA: Amarillo, Texas, you know.

DA: And he just, he just knew that if he went, uh, he would be disowned by his parents and any financial support for seminary would be, would be terminated. And, boy, he just agonized over that -

SA: Yeah.

DA: And eventually made the decision not to go, uh, but just, I think, has in some ways always regretted that decision.

SA: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

DA: But it was a difficult choice.

JM: Did each of you put the question to your parents prior to departing?

DA: No.

SA: No. As a matter of fact, I don`t know if my parents ever knew, because by that time I was that independent and I have been making decisions separately from my parents since I came. And it came as, uh, you know, my decision; no permissions asked or even thought. But when this friend was struggling with what he could or could not do because what his parents might feel, he felt this would just make his parents die inside if he were to do that. And I understood. I think his decision not to go was even stronger than my decision to go, because he struggled so much.

DA: Um-hmm. And I think my parents, um, might have been supportive, but I wasn`t willing to test that out. Um, afterwards, they were reasonably supportive, and I did not have financial support at issue, because I was there on scholarship, so that was not a question.

JM: Was there any, um, debate among students at seminary as to the merits of this? I mean, were there folks who said, "That`s a bad idea; I wouldn`t go."

SA: Uh, as far as I know, nobody ever said that it was a bad idea. Everybody accepted it as a moral challenge. We were seminary students, you know. We were studying theology and what it means to be a moral and ethical person, what kind of people we were. So, no, nobody questioned the validity of the call.

SA: Yes, yes. But the president of the seminary, Dr. [Howard] Schomer, at the time, uh, told us, "It`s not a good idea to go. Don`t go." Because [laughs] the finals or midterm or something was coming up, and our place was here to study, here at the seminary, and study. And he himself was going, but he did not feel that students` place was there when violence could possibly be an issue.

JM: Did you understand that argument as being made sincerely, or did you think he had other concerns, too?

SA: Well, at the time, I really didn`t take his word at heart. I did not feel that that was the case for me. That, I felt that I was needed there and needed to go.

DA: Well, yeah, same reaction. [SA clears throat] I just really didn`t pay any attention to his words. And I don`t - candidly, I don`t think any of us really took what he said -

SA: Seriously.

DA: Seriously, yeah.

JM: One more question I forgot to ask about the seminary community.

DA: Yeah?

JM: How many nonwhite students were there amongst all those enrolled?

DA: Oh, that`s a good question.

SA: Umm.

DA: Uh, it was not [0:25:00] a great number.

SA: Very few.

DA: What would you say?

SA: I don`t really know.

DA: Maybe just ten or fifteen percent at the most.

JM: Oh, but even as much as that, though?

DA: Yeah.

JM: So, how many African Americans would you guess were in the community of students?

DA: Well, maybe that`s a high estimate. I`m not sure. What do you recall?

SA: Oh, I can think of three or four people.

JM: Yeah.

DA: Um-hmm.

JM: Okay, yeah. And the total enrollment at any time would have been approximately-?

SA: That I don`t know.

DA: Umm, seventy, eighty people.

JM: In the various classes?

DA: Um-hmm, yeah.

JM: Tell me about what you, uh, [SA clears throat] what you saw and what you did when you arrived in Selma?

DA: Well, uh -

SA: Before we got to Selma.

DA: Right, right. [SA clears throat] Yeah, we were - you want to do it?

SA: At one point, we stopped at the gas station once we - I think we must have been somewhere in Selma, I mean, in Alabama by then.

DA: We were - we had crossed the state line, yeah.

SA: [Clears throat] And then, we were pumping, they were - guys were pumping gas, and Ginny and I got out of the car, and we were sort of walking around the station and, um, we were totally oblivious to what was happening. And Jesse, all of a sudden - what I recall was, all of a sudden, Jesse shouting, "Get in the car!" And, you know, I didn`t understand what was going on, but we immediately obeyed and got in the car. And he said, "Ackerman, you drive," or something like that, and we drove.

And we asked what was happening, and, um, somebody explained that, uh, some white guys were loitering in the station, and we, or somebody spotted them, and one of the guys went into the payphone and started calling. And that`s when Jesse said to get in the car, and we just [claps hands] took off very fast. And some car did follow us for quite a while, and we somehow got away.

DA: Yeah, I think they just turned off at one point. And shortly after that, we stopped. And we had brought along ministerial collars, you know, even though we were not ordained. But at that point, we put on those ministerial collars for whatever -

SA: [Laughs] Probably first time in your life!

DA: Oh, yeah, that`s very true - for whatever protective, uh, help those might provide. But that was the most memorable incident going down.

SA: Yeah.

DA: Otherwise, we just drove straight through, just straight through the night. My recollection is we left - what - Tuesday, mid-afternoon, something, and arrived in Selma sometime early morning or mid-day on Wednesday.

JM: Yeah. So, describe what you discovered in Selma.

DA: Well, it was an extraordinary, uh, scene, in effect. I mean, I guess the first thing that, uh, struck me in Selma was just the stark difference between the white side of town and the black side of town.

SA: Yes. [Clears throat]

DA: I mean, you enter the black side of town, and suddenly the streets are no longer paved and there are no longer sidewalks -

SA: Streetlights are not there. [Clears throat]

DA: There are no streetlights, you know, and the houses all look pretty shabby. There just simply was no evidence of public services on the black side of town.

SA: [Clears throat] It kind of looked -

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we`re rolling.

JM: Okay, we`re back after a short break.

DA: Okay.

JM: So, Mrs. Ackerman and Mr. Ackerman, you were saying that you see these stark differences in the community.

DA: Yeah.

JM: And it`s, yeah.

DA: And then we got to the, uh, got to the church and, you know, just all kinds of people, milling around the church, white and black.

JM: Was it Brown Chapel [A.M.E. Church in Selma]?

DA: It was Brown Chapel, right, right.

SA: Yes, yes.

DA: But I don`t specifically remember what happened, uh, that afternoon, except at some point, um, a rally began at the church, and people began kind of, uh, rousing, rousing the crowd and - in preparation for hearing from Dr. King. And, of course, the church was overflowing with people at that point.

SA: Filled, just to the rafters. It was people everywhere, and lots and lots of black people who must be a part of the Brown Chapel community, and we had so much singing. It was, it was when I first really encountered great singing of, uh, civil rights - now civil rights era songs and music happens now and then, but never like that! It was just so powerful!

DA: That`s also [0:30:00] where we, uh, heard about Jim Reeb, uh, who was a Unitarian minister who had come down very quickly in response to Dr. King`s call. And he had walked into the white part of the community, uh, for dinner on Tuesday night, and he and his companion - I forget whether there were one or two companions - had all been -

SA: Beaten.

DA: Beaten, he most brutally, uh, that night, and was lying in critical condition at the hospital at that hour.

JM: How did you, um - how did your group from Chicago, how did you integrate yourself into the wider community, and what was anticipated in terms of action going forward?

DA: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

SA: I`m not sure. It was kind of vague. I think the people at the church were so welcoming. I do remember that. They talked to us and, you know, thanked us so profusely. It made me feel like I was so appreciated, you know. I have never been so appreciated. [DA laughs] Everybody who would come, you know, who would be there would come up and say, "Thank you for being here." You know, "Thank you for supporting us." And that I remember, and they fed us a lot. They kept bringing different food, and there was station, you know, tables, and it was never empty. You know, they kept bringing things.

And, um, uh, somehow we were their guests, and that was so evident, because somehow at the end of that evening - can we go there?

JM: Yes, please.

SA: I was - Ginny and I were, uh, told by some women in the church, saying, "You are both coming with us." And somebody said, "These are two schoolteachers who had built a house somewhere outside, outskirts of Selma, and they will take care of you for the night." And so, we were taken to their home, uh, and it was very new, right, you know, uh, and not much furniture, except for a bed and a couple of chairs or something like that. And then, they, you know, made sure that we were comfortable, and then I think they left, and Ginny and I slept.

And in the morning when we got up, a group of people walked in and asked, "Did you sleep well? Was everything okay?" And we said, "Yes, it was, and thank you so much for hospitality." And they said, "We were really worried, so we stayed guard." And they were - somebody from the family throughout the night stayed outside to make sure we were safe. And that just really - I was so moved that they did that for us. And we slept - didn`t even know.

JM: Excuse me one second.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Now we`re rolling again.

JM: Okay. David, what were the arrangements for you?

DA: Uh, it was different. Um, I stayed in a, uh, the home of someone who was in the black community. It seemed like - yours was -?

SA: Yeah, it was, yes.

DA: Yeah, okay, okay. It seemed like public housing, uh, in - I`m not sure that it was, but it seemed like public housing. And, you know, the people - well, as Toko has said, they were just incredibly gracious to us throughout and just seemed to take such good care of us, both in terms of feeding us and housing us and just making us feel, uh, very welcome and very appreciated. And that night, I guess for the first time, I just began to hear stories about what life was like in Selma for the black community - oh, the rapes that would occur, uh, the periodic, uh, lynchings of, uh, of young men - and just got the sense that, uh, there was no justice system that operated.

JM: Was it a, um - how active was the climate of, um, of concern for your safety? Mrs. Ackerman, you mentioned that you awoke in the morning to discover that persons had watched the house overnight.

SA: Um-hmm. Um-hmm.

JM: Um, Mr. Ackerman, did you go to - did you retire that night sort of actively concerned about your personal safety in that moment, or - ?

DA: No, oddly enough, I didn`t, um, although Ginny and I had, uh, walked around the edge of the, where the black [0:35:00] and white, the edge of the community existed, uh, and found ourselves, uh, the victims, I guess, of just, uh, the most vile and, uh, evil accusations from white youth just on the other side of the line. And we had not heard about Jim Reeb yet, and somehow I was blacking out on what had occurred on Bloody Sunday and, for some reason, I did not yet feel a sense of personal endangerment. It`s very peculiar.

JM: Yeah. So, tell me about what then ensued in your stay in Selma.

SA: Well, we failed to mention about the rally. Dr. King spoke to us.

JM: Yes, please, please, yeah.

SA: And that was, I think, my first real, uh, hearing of Dr. King right up there and talking. And he was powerful! And, oh, he said that we will get through this, all of us together, and we were - so many of us from outside were here, friends to, uh, help, and he thanked those people whose conscience brought them there. And then he said that he would like to be with us when we do the march, but that he had to be appearing at a court somewhere and he would not be with us there in body, but he will be with us all the way, uh, in spirit, and that Reverend [Ralph] Abernathy would be leading the march at that point.

DA: There had been, uh - my understanding was that there had been an attempted march on Tuesday, uh, which had gotten to the foot of the Pettus Bridge, but no further. And so, then there was going to be another attempted march on Thursday. Um, didn`t know quite where it was going to go, but the most, uh, vivid memory is how we were arranged in the line of march. [Speaking to SA] And you may want to talk about this.

SA: Well, uh, we were told we needed to form a march, and I have never known what that meant. And right outside the church, on this dirt road, we all lined up. And the way we lined up was black women were all in the middle, and they were first, you know. They stood up and they lined up maybe three or four abreast. And then, black men were on both sides of that. And then, there were, you know, white women, and I was in that, in those rows. And then, uh, men who were - you know, white men, who were on the outside. And we were all kind of, maybe fifteen to twenty abreast, this way, and very orderly, you know. Everybody was - I guess we had been told we should be wearing our Sunday best. So, I think I must have been wearing flats and a skirt and things of that nature.

And then, it was towards the dusk, I think. It was kind of getting dark. But then, we, when we lined up, [sound from elsewhere in room] when the formation was done, they said, uh, "Now, lock your arms." And so, we were told to lock arms, and when we did that, it was just almost like electricity went through my body from, you know, [uncertain several words, at 39:12]. It was the most powerful thing I`ve ever, ever experienced! And although I was afraid, I was afraid because of the implications from what I had seen on TV and what I was told.

But also, when we stood up, all of a sudden, there were these troopers on both sides of this formation. There were, uh, Alabama troopers with sunglasses, which were reflective glasses, which you could not see their faces, and they were wearing, you know, helmets. And then, they stood like this with the baton. And [0:40:00] they looked so fierce! They looked so fierce, and they were everywhere. They were - all of a sudden, after we stood up - they were surrounding us.

And then, yet, when we locked arms, I felt like, you know, I could do anything with this group of people! And that was the most, um, memorable thing about it, that I was there to protect, but I was there protected. And, and, so then, we were - somebody said, "Let us march." And we walked maybe three or four steps at the most. And then, some booming voice said, "You may not go any further!" And I think it must have come from the head of the troopers.

DA: Jim Clark [sheriff of Dallas County, Alabama].

SA: Jim Clark. And then, it stopped, and I heard Abernathy, Reverend Abernathy, say, "Let us pray." And then, we all got down on our knees. And, uh, that was as far as the march ever went. From there on, it was through the whole night of, uh, vigil, different preachers getting up and praying, and then we would sing, and then somebody else would say something. And then, there would be long, long hours of just people talking to us.

And that`s when I heard for the first time what it was like to be living in the South in America. And these were kind of, uh, amazing life stories that would never - I never would have imagined happening possible. Somebody going to go and register to vote, um, which took apparently a great, great deal of courage to begin with, and then when they get there, um, they were simply found they couldn`t do, write something or, you know, made-up reasons why they could not stay and be registered - they get turned home. And, uh, those were the - not the only things. They started telling us about how their, uh, friend`s daughter was raped or, or, and how they were abused in different ways and - a whole night of stories like this. And yet people didn`t seem - they weren`t going to give up about this life and kept saying, you know, "We are glad you are here to help us get this through, so we will win."

DA: And I have very similar recollections with one difference, uh, maybe: As a white man, I had been given the place of honor on the outside of the line of march, and that`s when I first felt fear, I think. I really felt, uh, very, very vulnerable, and, uh, recollections of Bloody Sunday became very vivid in my mind at, uh, at that point. My recollection is not that we were surrounded by troopers, but that there were troopers across the road where we intended to, uh, to march, dressed exactly as Toko said, looking very, uh, intimidating and impersonal, because you just could not see their eyes.

SA: Yeah.

DA: Uh, but the other thing that came very important during the night was that the journalists were also there, including -

SA: Their lights.

DA: TV networks with their lights, which they kept on all night long.

SA: Night long.

DA: And I think that was, that was our guardian angel. I think it was those lights, [0:45:00] those journalists, because otherwise I think it could have been a very bloody, brutal scene, once again. But that night was just an extraordinary, uh, extraordinary night, and I came out of it with, uh, such immense respect for Dr. Abernathy. Um, and when I think - you know, I think as a leader of the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], Dr. Abernathy was always a little bit bumbling and perhaps not the world`s greatest organizer, but, my God, could the man pray!

SA: Oh, he was amazing!

DA: He just kind of had a direct pipeline to God. And, uh, he was the one that kept that whole march together. I mean, it was really, it was really him, and nobody else.

SA: And then, um, towards the early morning, the sun came up. And shortly after that or about that, um, [Reverend] Abernathy told us to get up, and he said, "Let us sing our national anthem." And so, we all got up and started singing, "Oh, say, can you see?" And that`s when I noticed the troopers didn`t know what to do, because they were - as I recall, they were all standing, still wearing a baton. But they were still wearing their helmets and they didn`t know whether to keep the helmets on, or they should do something decent [laughs] and take it off, or what. I think some of them really were in great quandary. [DA laughs] And so, they started looking at each other and kind of whispering, or, you know, they were looking, and, and I could, we could see their, you know, quandary.

And so, then everybody finally looked to Jim Clark, and he looked so flustered. [DA laughs] And he took his helmet finally off and he went like this. And everybody else immediately, you know, went like that. And they didn`t sing, but they - at the time, to me, it felt like there was a communication. There was a community that went beyond these people who were marching, that it changed something.

DA: It was a wonderful moment, um, and, in a small way, just kind of represented what the whole nonviolent movement was about, uh, because King and others just - you know, the address was not only to the oppressed but to the oppressor, and, uh, it called, it tried to call forth the better angels of our natures. And in that moment, a little bit of that happened.

JM: That`s such a - the ironies embedded in that are just so many. It`s just -

DA: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Yeah.

JM: Um, I`m interested - um, Mr. Ackerman, let me ask, let me put this question to you. There`s obviously a spectrum of emotion in play here from real terrible despair to, you know, Mrs. Ackerman, you mentioned this moment of just feeling so electric and with promise and power of a whole group together. And I wonder how, I wonder if there was - I guess my question is: Was it a wide jumble of feeling, or was there any crystallization of one sort or another as you went through an experience like that?

DA: I don`t remember any, uh, any roller coaster of, uh, of emotion. Once we, you know, walked our three or four steps and then came to a halt and began to engage in the all-night vigil, we were just caught up in, caught up in the vigil. I think any sense - for me, at least, any sense of fear disappeared. I was still very aware of the lights and the role that they were playing. But the whole night was just such an uplifting, uh, spiritual experience.

SA: And I process it, processed it afterwards, and the way I felt about it was that that was a community of atonement [pronounced "at-one-ment"] that somehow all the [0:50:00] disparate people, you know, different people came together and marched towards justice and truth. And somehow at that moment, those of us who were, who had locked arms and marched together created a community of atonement, and so atonement [pronounced "at-one-ment"] in a sense of healing, atonement [pronounced "at-one-ment"] in a sense of bringing together all the ills, which produced new life in a way.

And so, that`s why that particular march kind of is, um, paradigm for my life, that it`s - it became a most important "Aha!" moment for me. I wrote my thesis after I came back from that march on, uh, atoning community in the nursery school children, because I was working with children. And, but the whole idea was when you really work as one, as a community, things can happen.

JM: What, um - I guess this would have carried you through to Friday, then. Is that right?

DA: It carried us through to Friday, and, uh, my recollection becomes very vague at that point. My recollection is that we went out to breakfast, the twelve of us and Jesse Jackson. And, uh, Jesse had arranged for, um, Jim Farmer, uh, head of Congress of Racial Equality, uh, to join us. And, uh, what we talked about, I`m not quite sure, but, you know, Jim was also a very dynamic person in his own right. So, I`m sure it was a very - although we were probably all pretty sleepy at that point, too, but I`m sure it was a very good, very good discussion. And then, after that, we left for home.

JM: With Jesse Jackson?

DA: Left just after breakfast.

JM: And he came, he returned, as well?

SA: Yeah, he was a part of -

DA: Yeah, yeah, Jesse came with us.

SA: But my recollection, for some reason, is that Alabama troopers` cars led the way, escorted the cars out.

DA: Really?

SA: And I don`t know why I remember that.

DA: Really? Hmm, I don`t have that recollection.

SA: And I don`t remember that breakfast happened after it. So, you know, I -

JM: Yes, sure.

SA: Yeah, I wish I had written it down but -

JM: Your return to Chicago was uneventful?

DA: It was completely uneventful.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

DA: Right, right.

JM: Um, let me just invite your, your sort of long view now of those, of those hours and days in Selma, and your sense of kind of how you came to integrate that and find what meaning you place upon it, and so forth. Of course, we`ve touched on some of these themes already, but in the broadest sense, I`m just interested in your thoughts and comments.

DA: Well, in, um - I guess there are a number of different ways of coming at it. One is, one is that it`s just been an extraordinary - uh, what - sixty years, half-century for civil rights in this country, uh, and not just for, not just for, uh, the black members of our society. But, you know, it went from there to women`s liberation, from there to the disabled and handicapped, and finally to, uh, to gays, lesbians and, uh, transgender, uh -

JM: We meet today on the very - I`ll just note for the tape - it`s, as you are well aware, the first day -

DA: Oh.

JM: The U.S. military no longer is -

SA: Yes.

DA: And given what happened to my brother, I, uh, I celebrate this day. It`s been too long in coming.

SA: Yeah.

JM: The "Don`t ask, don`t tell" rule [federal legislation barring gays from serving opening in the U.S. military] now is abolished in the U.S. military, as of today.

DA: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I could not be more thrilled with that happening, right.

In personal terms, I guess what most stayed with me was just the clear absence of the justice structure in, uh, in Selma and, uh, just the incredible disparity between the black and the white, uh, communities. Uh, and that played a role in my eventually dropping out of seminary but choosing to go to law school instead and, uh, kind of responding to Kennedy`s call to go into public service in some manner.

So, that`s how I eventually ended up with - you know, first I worked for the Washington office of the National Council of Churches and did not so much civil rights stuff, but anti-poverty advocacy work, and then moved into congressional research, um, service. [0:55:00] But behind it all, of course, has also been what Dr. King, um, stood for and this, um, you know, it`s a call that just, um - there`s been nobody that has embodied, uh, that kind of call for atonement [pronounced "at-one-ment"] or reconciliation or, um, just a call to the better angels of our nature in as powerful a form as Dr. King did. So, I just feel privileged to have actually been exposed to that in some small way.

SA: Um, after we came to Washington, D.C., and we ended up living in a suburb, where we are now, um, one of the experiences was that the racial issues hasn`t really finished, that there are discriminations still. And this was, uh, this is - how many years ago would it have been we were - we had just been at Bradford Road? Maybe it`s 19 - early [19]70s?

DA: Yeah, that`s when we were at Bradford Road, right, during the whole decade.

SA: Um-hmm. And after we were living there for a while - it was all-white community - and across the street from us moved in, uh, a black family with two children. And, uh, I was so delighted, and so we invited, you know, the little girl, and I said, "There are five girls in the house behind us, so, you know, I will introduce you and you can play with them." And so, then she, you know, went over and was so excited and, uh, came back a few minutes later - no, and she played with them, and they had a good time.

The next day she came over and she went back to the family again. And a few minutes later, she came back and she was totally crestfallen and she was so sad. And, uh, I said, "What happened?" And she said, "They won`t play with me." And I said, "Well, why? You had such a good time yesterday." And then, she said, "Well, they told me that their father told them that I can`t come and play anymore."

And I got so angry! I was so upset, first of all, to have put Vera in that place. And then, second of all, for this family to have discriminated in something I - I just was unprepared for this. And so, I marched out there and I gathered the girls together. And oldest was twelve, thirteen, something like that, and, um, I said, "Why can`t Vera play with you?" And she said, "Well, our father said that she can`t come to our house because she`s black."

And I said, "I don`t really believe that that is right, but if your father tells you this, I know you can`t do, you know, what he tells you not to do. But when you come and play at our yard," which is between the two yards, and they came all the time to play at our yard, "When you are in our yard, you will have to play with anybody who is there, which includes Vera." And they said, you know, "Okay." And, uh, as I remember, they did do that a few times.

But that`s when I realized that things were not all finished, and rights of people and equality and all the things that we have worked for, still continues [1:00:00], that we need to be vigilant, because it happens in little ways that affect little children in how we pass on prejudice.

JM: Can we pause for a minute, John?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: We`re back.

JM: Mrs. Ackerman, just generally speaking, that community was located where, and the name was -?

SA: Silver Spring [Maryland].

JM: Oh, Silver Springs, Maryland, okay.

SA: It`s a singular, Silver Spring.

JM: Oh, Silver Spring?

SA: Um-hmm. We do have the Silver Spring.

JM: Okay, but this is the singular, and it`s in Maryland, also?

SA: In Maryland, yes.

JM: Okay, so it`s more or less suburban Washington, D.C.?

SA: Northern suburb, yeah.

DA: It`s just across the border.

SA: Yeah, ten miles from White House.

DA: Right, part of Montgomery County.

JM: Yeah. Um, I really want to thank you for coming in to share these recollections and this history. It`s just wonderful, um, for us to have it, and it`s been a real honor and a privilege. Any final thoughts?

DA: Just that the battle goes on. I mean, I look at what`s happening with, uh - what has happened for decades with the drug laws and how that`s been used against the black community. And now with, uh, new attempts to limit voting rights, I mean, it - you know, somehow, somehow that boulder keeps having to be pushed up the mountain.

JM: Well, let me thank you both so much. It`s been a real -

DA: Well, thank you. It`s been a privilege for us. Thank you for having us.

SA: Thank you very much for letting us tell the story.

JM: Thank you.

[Recording ends at 1:01:44]

END OF INTERVIEW

Sally Council

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